

The Christian

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Edited by
KATHLEEN BLISS

News-Letter

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DEAR MEMBER,

On the day on which this News-Letter is published there begins in Geneva the first meeting of the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches to be held since 1939. The cumbersome title probably means little to most people. The significant fact is that after six years of war when Christians have been kept apart not only by physical causes, but also by experiences which have bitten deep into men's souls, leaders of the Churches will meet each other face to face and seek together God's will for his Church. The British delegation is led by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The leaders of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Bishop Wurm and Dr. Niemoeller will also be present.

THE STUTTGART DECLARATION

On October 19th, 1945, there took place an incident which may in the future be seen as a moment in Church history. It helped to clear the way for this Geneva meeting and for the re-establishment of Christian fellowship between those whose countries had been enemies. At Stuttgart the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany met. To the meeting came members of the World Council of Churches, including the Bishop of Chichester, Dr. Kraemer of Holland, Pastor Maury of France, Dr. Michelfelder of the United States and Dr. Visser 't Hooft, secretary of the World Council of Churches. This was the first formal encounter between leaders of the German Church and accredited representatives of Christians from outside Germany. On the morning of the 19th Bishop Wurm read a statement which has since become known as the Stuttgart Declaration. It was not, as one newspaper in this country would have us believe, "coaxed out of the German Church leaders by the Bishop of Chichester." It was prepared and typed on the 18th, and circulated to all present in that dingy room when the Bishop arrived on the 19th. The Declaration reads as follows:—

"The Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, in its meeting of October 18th-19th in Stuttgart, greets the representatives of the World Council of Churches.

"We are the more grateful for this visit, as we with our people know ourselves to be not only in a great company of suffering, but

also in a solidarity of guilt. With great pain do we say : through us has endless suffering been brought to many peoples and countries. What we have often borne witness to in our own congregations, that we declare in the name of the whole Church. True we have struggled for many years in the name of Jesus Christ, against the spirit which has found its terrible expression in the national socialist regime of violence, but we accuse ourselves for not being more courageous, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously and for not loving more ardently.

"Now a new beginning is to be made in our Churches, founded on the holy scriptures, directed with all earnestness on the only Lord of the Church, they now proceed to cleanse themselves from influences alien to the faith and to set themselves in order. Our hope is in the God of grace and mercy, that he will use our Churches as his instruments and will give them authority to proclaim his word and in obedience to his will to work creatively among ourselves and among our whole people.

"That in this new beginning we may become wholeheartedly united with other Churches of the ecumenical fellowship fills us with deep joy.

"We hope in God that through the common service of the Churches the spirit of violence and revenge which again to-day wishes to become powerful may be brought under control in the whole world and the spirit of peace and love may gain the mastery, wherein alone tortured humanity can find healing.

"So in an hour in which the whole world needs a new beginning we pray *Veni Creator Spiritus.*"

There are times in personal estrangements when something has to be said on the initiative of one side ; if that word is not spoken, there is an impasse. The renewal of fellowship by acknowledgement of guilt is an essential part of the Christian experience. The other delegates present responded by welcoming the Declaration for themselves and on behalf of their Churches. The "new beginning" of which the Declaration spoke was made possible.

The contrast is striking that while the men of Nuremberg were coming before the microphone and saying one after the other "not guilty," the leaders of the Church, many of whom had suffered at the hands of the men of Nuremberg, were standing before God, and saying "guilty." In the centre of Berlin there stands the vast placard erected by the Russians on which the distinction between "Germans" and "Nazis" is clearly stated. There is a difference between those who planned and executed crimes and those who were ignorant of them, or felt themselves powerless to prevent them, and still more those who protested against them to the point of suffering. Only within the Church, in the language of the Church before God, can the paradox of the inequality of responsibility of the Russian placard and the solidarity of guilt of the Stuttgart Declaration be understood. Both are true, but they

belong to different realms. This confession of the Church's "solidarity of guilt" with the nation is not a case of relapsing into a doctrine of "blood" by which if one is guilty, all are guilty in a tribal solidarity: it is obedience to the Christian command of love which forbids a man to contract out and constrains him to stand with the guilty.

MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH'S MESSAGE

Misunderstanding within Germany was inescapable. Although the Church leaders did their best to make the Declaration widely known, many Germans, including pastors and members of their congregations, received their first impression of the contents of it from headlines in the local press. The whole emphasis fell not on the key words "a new beginning," but on the phrase "solidarity of guilt." The German consciousness after years of hysterical emphasis by the Nazis on the shamefulness of the war guilt clause in the Treaty of Versailles, reacts pathologically to the word "guilt." Rational examination is rendered well nigh impossible for the vast majority by the fact that the mere phrase awakens passions, resentments and fears, and causes the sores into which the Nazis rubbed their salt to sting again.

The Church is facing a difficult situation in holding to its Declaration. Left as practically the only institution in occupied Germany which is still a "going concern" with a measure of autonomy and a staff with freedom of movement, the Church has an immense chance of gaining popular support by standing by the people on the people's own terms. All but the most fortunate Germans living in the undisturbed countryside are preoccupied with the business of keeping fed and warm during the winter. Present sufferings obliterate all memory of the sufferings of others; the stream of refugees from eastern Germany, the stripping of industrial plant, the ruthlessness of some measures of de-Nazification (bringing local government and industry in some cases to a standstill)—all these things tempt the Church to declare that Germany having "received of the Lord's hand *double* for all her sins," the account is closed, and to preach a "solidarity of guilt" in a sense which includes victor and vanquished in an undifferentiated condemnation. To this temptation the leaders of the Church in Germany have not succumbed, and they are now meeting with the accusation from their own people that they are providing the victors with an added excuse for saying: "You deserve all that's coming to you."

DR. ASMUSSEN SPEAKS TO THE CHURCH IN GERMANY

That we Christians in this country should understand the true Christian meaning of the Stuttgart Declaration and the cost at

which it has been upheld, is important at this moment. We are, therefore, particularly glad to publish as a Supplement Dr. Asmussen's remarkable defence¹ of it, addressed to his own people.

There are two problems which exercise the minds and consciences of Christians, upon which, if by imagination we can enter into Dr. Asmussen's experience through his words, new light is shed.

First, here is a grappling with the whole perplexing question of sin, guilt and repentance at its most difficult point, namely when it is not a question of personal responsibility for the sin of one individual against another, but of corporate guilt and of the Church's responsibility for the sins of the nation. And this grappling is not taking place in theological debate, in learned treatises garnished with examples from the past. It is being fought out in contemporary history; here in this situation which the Church is facing in Germany is a slab of real life which can teach the whole Church, for here theological concepts have become burning realities.

Who can turn from this Declaration to the description by *The Times'* special correspondent of the allied air attack on Dresden on the night of February 13-14, 1945, in which 25,000 people were burned to death in their cellars, without asking where we Christians in this country stand *before God* in this matter? And as we contemplate the fact that Germany lies in the hands of the victors, at their mercy, who can doubt that God's judgment hangs over us?

Secondly, here is an example of the fact that when the Church acts faithfully within its own competence and in fulfilment of its own duty, its action may have indirect but powerful political consequences. The individual Christian, as we are constantly saying in the News-Letter, has to act as a citizen in the world, and most of the Church's influence on political affairs is of this kind. But occasionally events present the Church as a whole with a situation in which a Church has to say something which it knows to be religiously inescapable and at the same time may be politically inexpedient and to its own worldly detriment. Such a situation faced the leaders at Stuttgart.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

¹ Dr. Asmussen was one of the first Confessional pastors to be forbidden to preach by the Nazis. He was a marked man, suffering terms of imprisonment. He is now Chancellor of the Evangelical Church in Germany, an office which can most nearly be described as "General Secretary."

Dr. ASMUSSEN EXPLAINS

By ERIC FENN

(Dr. Asmussen's statement is too long for reproduction in full. Some parts have, therefore, been omitted and others summarized, but every effort has been made to reflect faithfully the mind of the author and to preserve the balance and emphasis of the original statement.—J. E. F.)

I

The Stuttgart Declaration is the result of a conversation between the Churches. There is a real danger that in the era we are entering nations will converse only with atom-bombs. But that only makes it the more necessary for Christians to make every effort to re-establish brotherly relations.

But can Christians talk together in such a way as to be overheard and understood by the world? Christians have their own language which is not to be understood by everyone. In Stuttgart we were convinced that we were speaking in the presence of God—as if nobody existed except God and our brethren; but for the world "the presence of God" is merely a fine phrase. What, therefore, can the conversation mean to the world?

Nevertheless, we did speak—and the world overheard what we said. We are glad that our Declaration has been made known in every possible way, because we believe that what was said is so important that it was worth the risk of being misunderstood by the world. It has indeed been misunderstood. That is clear from Press and Radio comment. We are charged with having exceeded the function of the Church and entered the realm of the world's business. We have been accused of betraying the Fatherland by stigmatizing Germany as solely responsible for the World War, and thus doing the enemy's job for him. And while some of our fellow-countrymen are angry about that, others—those under the influence of the Victor-Powers—are glad about it; we have said precisely what the Victors most want to hear Germans say.

Now this is significant: the Churches have been misunderstood both by victor and by vanquished. Both, otherwise at enmity, are at one in interpreting the Churches' action in terms of day-to-day politics; both judge the Declaration by the use they can make of it for their own ends. Thus, there is ultimately an evil solidarity between friend and foe; the solidarity of those who do not recognize the existence of a God who bids us speak the truth without regard for the consequences. And this ultimate solidarity in bitterness and evil is a thing imposed on friend and foe alike by an objective law;

there is no way of escape from it except through the intervention of some other person armed with divine power.

As long as this solidarity governs the life of men, they can only misunderstand one another. Men can only hear the voices of their own side, and voices from the other side reach them in a distorted form. For instance, nothing—no propaganda, no government decree, no secret police—can prevent the German people from thinking of the deportation into eastern Germany, turning it into a concentration camp, whenever Dachau is mentioned, or thinking of the injustice they suffer when the injustice they have done is held up to them. Nor can anything prevent the victors from thinking of the Greeks who went hungry under German occupation whenever one ventures to say that we are hungry ; or from shrugging their shoulders when we point out our terrible lack of transport and saying that it is simply a consequence of losing the war. It is thus almost irrelevant which of the two voices is right. No doubt the future will show that, but for the present what matters is what each side wishes to believe or is secretly compelled to believe.

The truth is that in this accursed world we do not fear sin and have no horror of it. That is why we cannot convince one another however hard we try ; we always bump up against the obstinacy of the other man. But we will not accept this impasse and so we talk more passionately, more convulsively ; in the end, hysterically. When you understand this, you begin to understand Joseph Goebbels. It is a favourite weapon of the deceiver. Just think what " revelations " you may have fallen victim to in your life—the menace of the Jews, of the priests, of the Bolsheviks, of the Czechs, of the Nazis, of the Gestapo. All these have flooded over men and millions have been seduced by them—and nobody has been changed at all ! One begins to suspect that it is the man who reveals these horrors who himself has something to hide. All this indignation is no sign of a real horror of sin ; it is a sign of fear—fear that our own sin may come to light.

This process may be seen in a less crude form than in the newspapers, among those who pride themselves on a higher point of view. Educated people like to seek in history for the roots of our contemporary catastrophe. Then we learn—and with some amazement—that Bismarck and Frederick the Great, and people even longer dead, are among those responsible. And any honest man must take this reproach seriously and admit that there are some grounds for it. But this delving into history does not impress Germans very much because they remember that the parent tree branched in the past. If Hitler's father was called Bismarck and his uncle Frederick the Great, then his grand-uncle of another line was Louis XIV and another was Robespierre and yet another

Napoleon. And this reflection is the more potent because other nations keep dark about these things.

The Churches speak out of this accursed world. They say, "Give up this mutual reckoning. Don't go on trying to be judge in matters which are too difficult for you. You will only come to grief if you try to usurp the function of God, and will end by destroying all confidence in sound judgment." For the idea of politics as a smooth process has become more and more suspect in the last few decades. However much you may try to present it as a rational and ordered process, the number of those who simply disbelieve you will go on growing month by month.

The Church then has no thought of serving political interests. Why should it? The Church is grateful to be able to speak its own language, even if it is misunderstood, by chance or by design. The misunderstanding may be due to the sinfulness of the Church or the infidelity of the world, but we cannot run away from it.

And, compared with the conflicting voices of the world, the voice of the Church is plain and simple. It says to the brother from another country: "I have sinned"—including in this "I" both the speaker and those he represents. That is not a light thing to say. Men complain that it was politically unwise. But the Churches are not primarily concerned with political wisdom, but with truth—that is, whether what was said is true to the fact that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

We are of course impressed by those who say, why burden the people still further with a confession of guilt when they are suffering so terribly. We know very well what the suffering is. Indeed we were the first to protest to the victors about it—a thing which is not mentioned by our German opponents. But the injustice under which we suffer as a people has nothing to do with our confession of guilt; it makes not the slightest difference to the evil we Germans have done in Poland, Greece and Holland, etc. Nor does it lessen our guilt towards the Jews or justify our silence or co-operation during these twelve evil years. And unconfessed guilt stops our mouths and shuts the victors' ears. I ask my fellow pastors: would you dare invoke the Name of Jesus Christ against injustice if you had not first called upon the same Name for forgiveness? Stop looking to men and look to God. We must do what is right in His eyes.

Our message is now loose in the world. Those who know Christ's voice will hear in it a confession of their own guilt. That, of course, the world does not believe. The world thinks that foreign Christians will see in our confession merely their own justification. But Christians and pastors in Germany ought not to think like that. And the response of our brethren from the World Council who met with us in Stuttgart showed that they understood.

But what right had we to speak for our nation in this matter ? For that is what we did.

Note, first, the way in which the guilt of our people was spoken of in Stuttgart. The Declaration speaks first of all of the suffering which we have caused to other peoples. Then it goes on to say that we, who speak, have struggled for years against the spirit which caused that suffering, and yet that we are bound to admit responsibility if we are to do our duty as Christians.

Thus, we have avoided that new guilt which many of our contemporaries have incurred, the guilt of avoiding responsibility for the past by blaming it all on the Nazis. That will not do. It only brings our nation into further disrepute. Of course, only a few in Germany have been personally responsible for murder and torture, and many are suffering for crimes which they never committed, at least according to the standards of human justice. But it is not true that any single German, standing before God and his Christian brethren, can deny that Hitler and Goebbels, Goering and Himmler, Bormann and all the S.S. Guards in concentration camps are of our own blood, and that therefore we share responsibility with them. What is this responsibility ?

It is, as we said in Stuttgart, that throughout these years we have been sinning against the First Commandment. That is how we made possible the ghastly things that happened. If you don't believe that there is a connection between the First Commandment and world politics, then you won't agree with us. But don't just say that "people won't understand." That is to evade the issue and take refuge in a question of phraseology. You must first declare yourself on this point of principle—and then we are willing to discuss the phrasing.

For ourselves, we are certain that lack of courage in witnessing, poverty of prayer, weakness of faith and luke-warm love have been real factors in historical events. We had the highest human right to wash our hands of the whole business. Have we not, for practically twelve years, gone in danger of our lives and been condemned, imprisoned, libelled ? But for us the Commandments are realities, not phrases. The man who breaks the first three of them breaks the unity of God's world—and breaks all the rest of the Commandments too, and is involved in the destruction wrought by Hitler and his colleagues.

Not that we are defending the party leaders or party followers. We certainly shall not attempt to rescue them from justice. But we do not deny that they are our brothers. And for this reason : Jesus Christ calls us to be priests—all of us ; and these who lead

the Church must be foremost in this priesthood. The word spoken in Stuttgart was a priestly act. The test of what we said is whether or not it can be *prayer*—for thus only can you talk of these things before God.

This priesthood, then, must be tested before God. But it must also be shown forth to Christian people. The Holy Scriptures leave no doubt that when we confess our sins to God we must also confess them to our brethren. Perhaps we have forgotten that in Protestantism, and must recover it. Well, we have often spoken clearly enough to the Christians of Germany about the guilt of our people. Now we have done the same thing to Christians from other countries. It was in obedience to the call of Christ to be priests.

The essence of priesthood is sacrifice. That we have made—for with our words we have given away ourselves, our names and our reputations. We have identified ourselves even with the darkest elements in our people and we have warned the Victor-Powers against trusting in power and retaliation. Thus we are wholly at the mercy of the world and of God—of God because we stand before Him as guilty; of our people, because we have spoken on their behalf; and of the foreigner, because our confession is in his hands. The risk is great, but not to take it would be much more dangerous, for we should then delay our home-coming, and I have yet to see how you can become righteous without repentance.

We have to take the risk of giving holy things to the world, if the world is to be changed. So, too, what is not holy must be given to God, so that it may be changed by His mercy. If you do not understand this, then it is little use to talk with you; you are one of those who still trust in education and enlightenment to cure the world's ills. And there are certain inescapable questions which are unanswerable on those terms; they need the priest to answer them.

That, indeed, is exactly where the priest comes in. He stands with his sacrifice on the edge of the inexplicable. Naturally, an age which trusts in reason will set the priest aside and see in "the priesthood of all believers" a mere empty phrase. We did not speak in Stuttgart because we thought we understood the events of the past twelve years. On the contrary, the period from 1933 to 1945 seems to us more and more unintelligible. We do not believe that it *had* to be like that—by some law of logic; Communists may believe that it belongs to their Hegelian Dialectic, and others may convince themselves that they saw it coming. Some of our well-meaning friends abroad are a little too sure they understand it all because they overlook the abyss into which, as enlightened people, they dare not look.

The guilt of the Nazis is too clear to waste many words on. But what is worth thinking about is that there is a connection

between this guilt of the Nazis and the guilt both of their followers and of their opponents, and even of the foreigner. The one pushed the other deeper even while trying to pull him out; the one did the other's business for him even while trying to put him out of business: the one gave the other fresh life even while seeking to kill him. And this the men who drafted the Stuttgart Declaration did think about. They came to the conclusion that it was not all predetermined by some inexorable impersonal law. Instead, they found illumination in the Revelation of St. John. The standards of the liberal bourgeois broke under their hands, but the Book of the Revelation, as an integral part of the whole Bible, lit up the unintelligible present. This illumination was not grounded in reason, but out of it they were compelled to cry, "Woe is me! I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips." Ought they to have kept silent because some people might be annoyed?

This cannot be set aside as a sign of "crisis mentality." We are certain that we are nearer to reality than those who scorn to see history as apocalyptic. For the most part of Christian history men saw life in apocalyptic terms and only when the western world forsook its Christian foundations did that way of looking at it disappear. It may or may not be that God has given the devil more freedom in these days than in earlier ages; but nobody can stop us seeking sanctuary from his raging. Nor can anyone stop us being anxious about those who regard it as a sign of deficient education or lack of courage when we take the fury and craft of the Prince of Hell seriously as we look out on contemporary events; for they may end in loss and shame.

We tremble to think of these last terrible years. What happened in them does not seem properly human. We tremble when we think of all the good citizens who sank so low as to aid the transgressor. We tremble when we see that God apparently has destroyed five Germans for every person killed by us. We tremble to think what it would mean if this same law which has operated in Germany should be applied in the case of those who have more recently been murdered, violated, starved and driven out of their homes. Suppose God should demand these souls at the hands of those who now have the power?

There is no starving Greek, no murdered Jew, no tortured prisoner, no humiliated Pole or Russian who is forgotten of God. That holds too, for every hungry child driven out of Silesia. For every raped woman, for everyone killed in air-attack. Not one is forgotten of God. What have those who trust in reason to say about that? Surely it is time that we confessed our sins and fled from God's inexorable judgment to take our stand before the Son of Man!

I can find no good grounds for questioning our confession. We have come to this : that, as a whole people, our very bones dissolve if we keep silence. The world is plunging into disorder as it rejects the priest and exalts the intelligent politician, the clever propagandist. Must we go that lunatic way ? I personally have found that at least you have to feel shame when you find yourself in the company of those who as Christians confess their sins and, as priests, confess the sins of others. I am going on in their company.

III

What then have we to do now ?

In recent centuries man has had a picture before his eyes of what he wanted to happen. There have been the Democratic, Nazi and Communist ideals. But the German dream has been shattered. The German people has no ideal left, for the picture of what he wants has faded from every German mind.

That is a terrible poverty, but perhaps not so great as might appear. Even before National Socialism there were people who said that the day of the great ideal was over, except for propaganda purposes, because history showed that most of the great ideals which had been preached were, in fact, changed into their opposites as soon as they began to take on reality. It is certainly going to be very hard to unite the German people again under the banner of any political ideal ; for the remaining political ideals in the world have no value even as propaganda for the Germans, let alone as reality. The German people will have to do with what it has got—which is *nothing*. And the question is whether this “standing before Nothing” is going to become a philosophy of life. If so, then it spells Nihilism. The Christians of Germany pray that this shall not happen. They pray that the German people may turn to Christ. For there is now no other choice for them. It is Christ or Nothing. For the multiplicity of things which makes it hard to decide for Christ has disappeared for the German people. Their needs are innumerable and clamant ; but the one urgently necessary thing is the service of Christ.

Are Christians in Germany going to turn with determination to the service of Christ ? Or will they get bemused with the hopeless multiplicity of tasks which crowd upon them in the reconstruction of our public life ? These things have got to be done, but the service of Christ must come first, and must never become just one task among many. The service of Christ must be exclusive, for only then will it be all-embracing.

And, if the German people charge us with offering them prayer and bible-study when they want bread, we must face the charge

openly. We must not take refuge in our respectable contribution to relief schemes. An earthly life is only fulfilled in the service of Christ the King. That is what Christians in Germany must now demonstrate. It is the great chance offered to them of showing that the Holy Scriptures can be trusted and those who live like that have "all these things added unto them."

But does German Christianity know what the service of Christ really means? That is a life and death question. And whoever tries to answer it (both the Christians and non-Christians) will have to have very concrete things to say. We owe the world a testimony to what it means to honour Christ and find in Him new life.

The Commandments of God show us the way. They speak of duties towards God and our neighbour in such a way that both things become one. I cannot do my duty to my neighbour unless I see it also as a duty to Christ. And the opposite is true also. But the tradition we have inherited from secularism makes it easy to think of the service of our fellowmen as the only kind of service, as if it were in itself the service of God. That is not so. If you are not learning to serve God your service to your fellowman will not only fail to please God: it will not be much use to your fellowman.

So the first step in that repentance which is required of us is a whole-hearted service of Christ, reaching right into the hard world of things. It is a deadly mistake to think you can ride off on a spiritual cloud. Our Christian service must, therefore, bring order into daily life, giving the year its shape and colour and being visible in life. It may sound like a contradiction, but whoever sets himself to this service of Christ learns to serve his brethren. Whoever turns away from the multiplicity of things to this one thing, is able to deal also with the multiplicity. Whoever has the courage to let his turning to God be a return to the world does good to the world and is found standing in the midst of it. Whoever dares to forsake his standing-ground in the world for a new standing-ground in God's service, discovers, even in the world, that he is not left without foundation. Whoever in this service of Christ confesses his guilt becomes able to stand up for his rights.

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